



Quality 101: Identifying the Core Components of a High-Quality Early Childhood Program

By Simon Workman and Rebecca Ullrich February 13, 2017

Every day, millions of American families go through a familiar ritual: dropping off their young child at child care or preschool. And while there are many reasons why parents choose a particular program—cost, location, the teachers, shared values, the program’s specific focus—one thing is universal: As parents walk away from the classroom in the morning to start their own day, each of them hopes that they have made the right decision and that their child will have a rich and fulfilling day, supported by a loving and affectionate caregiver.

Unfortunately, parents often have very few child care options and limited ways to really know the quality of care their child is receiving. The level to which basic needs are met—keeping the child well fed, safe, and clean—is usually easy to verify, but determining if one’s child is engaging sufficiently and is participating in age-appropriate learning activities is much harder to ascertain.

The need for high-quality early childhood education has never been greater. Increasingly, children are growing up in families where all available parents are working—out of necessity as well as choice. Furthermore, research continues to affirm the short- and long-term benefits for children who participate in high-quality early learning programs.¹ However, parents face significant barriers when searching for high-quality care. Waitlists are long and employers are inflexible, high-quality programs are expensive, and parents often lack the necessary tools to evaluate program quality. Many families live in child care “deserts,” and even when programs are available, quality is not well-regulated or supported by local, state, or federal policies, putting it out of reach for most families.²

This child care crisis has received increased attention in recent years, from policymakers, political candidates, and voters.³ However, there remains a critical need to better understand the components of high-quality programs to ensure policy solutions adequately support and promote access to quality for all families. To that end, this issue brief highlights three core indicators of high-quality early childhood programs, and

identifies six structural supports that are necessary to achieve and maintain high quality. These indicators and supports provide a roadmap for policymakers as they develop solutions to the current child care crisis and can also serve as a guide for parents seeking to make the best and most informed choices for their child.

Why does quality matter?

A large body of research has demonstrated the critical importance of the first three years of a child's life.⁴ The experiences and interactions children have in these early years significantly affects brain development and helps to establish the foundation for future learning.⁵ Warm and responsive interactions can create a nurturing and stable environment that enables the development of secure attachments between children and their caregivers—both those within and beyond their families. These attachments support children as they develop a sense of self and begin to understand their emotions, and they lay the foundation for establishing successful relationships at later ages.⁶ With an estimated 6 million young children enrolled in child care, it is clear that early learning programs, and the people who work in them, have a critical role to play in child development—a role that complements parents.⁷ Furthermore, this crucial development must be supported from infancy, when brain development is at its peak. Waiting until children enter preschool or kindergarten to introduce these vital interventions is simply too late.

The positive effects of high-quality early childhood programs on specific, short- and long-term outcomes for children, families, and communities, have been quantified by numerous research studies.⁸ In the short- to medium-term, children enrolled in high-quality early learning programs are less likely to need special education services during their K-12 years; are less likely to commit juvenile offenses; and more likely to graduate from high school. In the long term, those participating children are more likely to be employed and less likely to be dependent on government assistance.⁹ The positive effects are larger, and more likely to be sustained, when programs are high quality.¹⁰ In addition, the impact is greatest for children from low-income families.¹¹ Differences in children's cognitive abilities by income are evident at only nine months old and significantly widen by the time children are two years old.¹² Children living in poverty are more likely to be subject to stressful home environments—which can have lifelong impacts on learning, cognition, and self-regulation—while parents living in poverty have limited resources to provide for their families and high barriers to accessing affordable, high-quality child care.¹³ High-quality early learning programs staffed by warm and responsive adults can help mitigate these effects, offering a safe and predictable learning environment that fosters children's development.¹⁴

Despite evidence of the positive impact of high-quality early childhood education for all children, it remains out of reach for most low- and moderate-income families.¹⁵ The average price of center-based care in the United States accounts for nearly 30 percent of the median family income, and only 10 percent of child care programs are considered

high quality.¹⁶ Publicly funded programs—such as Head Start, Early Head Start, child care, and state pre-K programs—are primarily targeted at low-income families, but limited funding for these programs severely hinders access.¹⁷ This lack of access to high-quality early childhood education perpetuates the achievement gap, evidenced by the fact that only 48 percent of low-income children are ready for kindergarten, compared with 75 percent of moderate- or high-income children.¹⁸

Moderate-income families are typically ineligible for these publicly funded programs, but at the same time, such families struggle to afford the high cost of care in the private sector.¹⁹ This leaves parents facing a series of difficult choices, including prioritizing child care expenses over other household necessities; settling for low-quality child care that fits their budget; patching together multiple informal care options; or leaving the workforce altogether.²⁰ To ensure that all children can realize the gains that come from attending high-quality early childhood programs, policy solutions need to focus on improving program supports and creating funding strategies that will increase access to high-quality programs for children from all backgrounds.

What does high quality look like?

All states have regulations or licensing standards that child care providers must meet in order to legally operate in the state. These regulations provide a baseline standard and are primarily focused on protecting children from harm rather than on advancing child development and early learning.²¹ While these standards are critically important to children's well-being—mitigating risks from inadequate supervision, poor building and hygiene standards, and unsafe practices—they do not address the comprehensive needs of young children. As such, meeting licensing requirements serves only as a baseline providing the fundamental components necessary for operation rather than an indication of program quality. In addition, states have varying requirements when it comes to determining exactly which providers need to be licensed, often making exemptions for faith-based programs or based on the number of nonrelative children served. As a result, significant numbers of children attend license-exempt programs that are not required to meet even the minimum licensing standard.²²

Moreover, the key to a high-quality program is what happens inside the classroom or family child care home, namely the interactions that take place between the teacher and child.²³ In a high-quality program, teachers engage children with learning strategies that are tailored to the age of the child and use an appropriate curriculum to structure the learning experience.²⁴ A variety of supports are needed to facilitate these interactions so that high-quality teaching and learning can occur. As such, the quality of an early childhood program is dependent on the following three key factors.

Interpersonal interactions

The learning environment created by a teacher is critical to the quality of an early childhood program.²⁵ The experiences that a child has in their earliest years shape their development, and teachers play an important role in creating those experiences. A well-trained and highly skilled teacher tailors their interactions to fit the needs of the child—using responsive language, engaging all children in classroom activities, fostering independence, and creating a language-rich environment.²⁶ Effective early childhood teachers proactively prevent and redirect challenging behavior and respond to children’s needs with respect, warmth, and empathy. The experiences children have with teachers in their earliest years can also set the tone for their interactions with teachers in later grades and thus are crucial to promoting positive attitudes about school and approaches to learning.²⁷

Physical environment

Children need a physical setting—both inside and outdoors—where they can play, explore, and learn safely. The learning environment needs to include engaging and developmentally appropriate materials and be arranged to promote independence and exploration based on children’s different stages of development. For example, infants need to interact with their environment in a very physical way, examining cause and effect relationships by touching and feeling objects. The environment should therefore include toys made of different materials that are small enough to be picked up by an infant.

Toddlers and preschoolers use objects in more complex combinations and engage in socio-dramatic play with one another. Their environment needs toys that spark the imagination, such as play kitchens, and that can engage them in problem solving such as puzzles.²⁸ Learning centers—clearly defined areas set aside in a learning environment where children can have easy access to materials and engage in independent and self-directed learning activities—can be an effective way to organize and support developing abilities, encourage interactions, create opportunities for role playing, and promote literacy skills.²⁹

In addition to the indoor learning environment, children need access to outdoor space where they can move and engage with the natural world. Outdoor play has positive impacts on health and has been shown to combat childhood obesity and help develop stronger immune systems.³⁰ Research also shows that children who play outdoors regularly have more active imaginations, lower stress levels, and have greater respect for themselves and others.³¹

Program support structure

A high-functioning operating environment is an essential element of a quality early childhood program. This administrative operational support takes a number of forms. First, programs need effective leaders who can provide instructional support to teachers as well as sound business management to the overall program.³² These multiple leadership functions are complex and often need to be fulfilled by more than one person. Second, external to the immediate program, programs need a series of structural supports, including access to professional development, quality improvement resources, stable and sufficient funding streams, and a pipeline of well-trained teachers. These external supports recognize that early childhood programs do not operate in a vacuum and rely on the wider early childhood system.³³

All three factors need to be in place to ensure quality. A well-resourced classroom is not sufficient without an effective teacher to harness those resources. Meanwhile, an effective teacher is not sustainable without a support system to manage the business, support instruction, and provide professional development.

How states measure quality in early childhood

While there is no single definition of high quality and therefore no single measurement tool to determine and compare early childhood program quality across the United States, there are a number of tools that are widely used to assess and report the quality of early childhood programs.

Environment rating scales: The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, or ECERS for children ages 3–5, the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale, or ITERS, and the Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale, or FCCERS, are standardized tools used to measure process quality at the classroom level. The measures contain multiple items on which programs are rated, organized into seven subscales. These subscales include ratings of the space and furnishing, personal care routines, the activities and interactions that take place in the classroom, and how the program engages with families. Ultimately, these tools are designed to assess the various interactions that occur in the learning environment—for example, between staff and children and among children themselves, the interactions children have with materials and activities, and the structures that support these interactions such as the space and the schedule.³⁴

CLASS: The Classroom Assessment Scoring System, or CLASS, is an observation tool that assesses the interactions between teachers and children that affect learning and development. CLASS has separate scales for different age groups, reflecting the differences in how infants, toddlers, and preschoolers learn. The infant observation has just one domain while the pre-K observation has three domains. The observation assesses the quality of relationships, routines, the organization of the physical environment, and the way language is used and interactions are facilitated to prompt children to think critically.³⁵

National accreditation: Accreditation is a voluntary process that programs can use to help improve their level of quality and to demonstrate to families—both currently enrolled and prospective—that the program has gone above and beyond what is required by state regulation and achieved a specified level of quality.³⁶ To achieve these accreditations, programs need to engage in extensive self-study and go through an external validation process.³⁷ While these accreditations do differ, most contain a number of common standards. For example, they generally include standards related to the learning environment, teacher and child interactions, staff qualifications, professional development, and family engagement, among others.³⁸

QRIS: All states either have a quality rating and improvement system, or QRIS; a pilot; or are in the planning process for a QRIS.³⁹ QRIS are designed to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early childhood education settings.⁴⁰ Programs are assessed on multiple elements and receive a rating reflecting their level of quality—usually on a scale of 1 to 3 or 1 to 5. While there is not one single QRIS in use across the United States, each state has a unique QRIS reflecting their own priorities and context. Many QRIS do include environmental observations such as ECERS or CLASS as part of their assessment activities, and these scores factor into overall QRIS rating. Other elements of the rating might include family engagement activities, child assessments, and program management. Many QRIS also waive some requirements for programs with national accreditation, or automatically grant programs a certain QRIS rating as a result of their national accreditation.

What components are necessary to achieve and maintain high levels of quality?

In addition to a core set of health and safety requirements, the three factors discussed above make up the key elements of a high-quality program.⁴¹ In order to achieve and maintain these elements of high quality, early childhood programs need access to a number of key structures and supports, many of which can be aided by policy. While each program's pathway to quality will be unique, the following six elements represent the core components that are necessary for a quality program and are areas where policymakers should look to be supportive.

1. Professional and stable teacher workforce

The workforce is the most critical component of quality in an early childhood program. All teachers need to have a foundational knowledge of child development and be able to lead activities that promote children's learning at various ages. This important role requires that teachers have formal education and training in early childhood education.⁴²

Moreover, the early childhood workforce needs compensation that reflects the importance of their work and the expertise necessary to educate the nation's youngest children. Providing professional compensation and benefits, comparable to kindergarten teachers, helps recruit and retain effective and educated teachers and promotes a stable healthy learning environment for children.⁴³

In addition, programs need to be staffed at a level that allows for teacher-child ratios that are appropriate for the age of the children and the size of the group, such as those required for programs accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children.⁴⁴ Low teacher-child ratios enable teachers to focus on the individual needs of the children and engage them in meaningful interactions.⁴⁵ This means having both an adequate number of teachers specifically assigned to a classroom, as well as providing sufficient substitutes or floaters to cover for breaks, planning time, and paid leave.

The early childhood education workforce should also reflect the growing diversity of the child population, ensuring that children have teachers they can relate to and role models that reflect their own backgrounds.⁴⁶

2. Effective leadership

Early childhood program administrators are responsible for a broad range of tasks, requiring many different competencies.⁴⁷ First, programs need instructional leaders with a solid understanding of child development and teaching and learning strategies. Instructional leaders support teachers with lesson planning and curriculum implementation, behavior management strategies, and professional development.

Second, programs need leaders with sound business management skills. The majority of early childhood programs are private businesses, and similar to any other small business, their long-term stability is reliant on adequate business management and the implementation of good budgetary practices.⁴⁸ Programs require clear enrollment, financial, and personnel policies and need leaders who can implement these policies in a fair and consistent manner.⁴⁹

Finally, program administrators must be skilled in organizational management and relationship building. In addition to fostering relationships with families and the community, leaders play a key role in creating a positive atmosphere inside the program, which can minimize teacher turnover, increase program efficiency, and allow teachers to focus on the children.⁵⁰

These multiple administrative roles need to be staffed sufficiently, which ideally includes more than one person, given the varied skill sets required.⁵¹ In smaller programs—with limited capacity to employ multiple administrators—leaders need to be supported in their various roles through access to external technical assistance, leadership resources, and targeted professional development.

3. Age-appropriate curriculum

All early childhood programs should adopt a research-based curriculum that is developmentally, culturally, and linguistically relevant for all children.⁵² Curricula can provide a guiding philosophy for program activities, including teacher interactions and the design of the physical indoor and outdoor environment. Curricula also help teachers effectively structure and sequence classroom activities, target particular activities to build skills or meet development milestones, and build on prior learning and experiences. Curricula provide varying levels of flexibility to individual teachers; some provide highly structured models for teachers to implement, while others offer guiding principles and expect teachers to determine the best way to implement.⁵³

There are a large number of curricula available for programs to choose from, with some of the best known models being the Creative Curriculum, HighScope Curriculum, and Tools of the Mind.⁵⁴ Research has found a positive impact on early achievement scores and socioemotional behavior when programs intentionally apply a curriculum that is

supported by professional development, coaching, and sufficient resources.⁵⁵ Programs should adopt a curriculum that best fits their program philosophy and ensure teachers receive professional development and ongoing support to adequately incorporate the curriculum into their practice. It is also important that a curriculum is adopted for all age groups, not just preschoolers. Infants and toddlers need a curriculum that focuses on their need to explore and discover the world around them, guided by supportive and responsive caregivers.⁵⁶

Components of an effective curriculum

The National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning has identified 13 components that need to be present in an effective curriculum.⁵⁷

1. Grounded in child development principles
2. Evidence-based
3. Shows effects on child outcomes
4. Comprehensive across learning domains
5. Depth for each covered learning domain
6. Specific learning goals
7. Well-designed learning activities
8. Responsive teaching
9. Supports for individualized instruction
10. Culturally and linguistically responsive
11. Ongoing assessments
12. Professional development opportunities
13. Family involvement materials

4. Comprehensive family engagement activities

A high-quality program recognizes that families are essential to children's educational success and has policies in place to engage families in children's learning. Programs need to develop family engagement strategies that encourage families to participate in their child's learning and promote two-way communication, enabling parents to share with teachers the unique strengths and talents of their child.⁵⁸ Strategies must also be responsive to family needs, recognizing the increasing diversity of the child population and the specific needs that arise as a result. Engaging with families in an inclusive and reciprocal way can help providers understand a family's culture and values, which can inform the development of culturally responsive learning experiences.⁵⁹

Family engagement often involves providing feedback on children's progress and discussing how parents can sustain learning activities at home.⁶⁰ This can take many forms, including regular parent-teacher conferences; daily communications between teachers and families, for example through daily report sheets and emails; monthly newsletters; parent-in-classroom events; family open nights; and other events intended to build a community that includes children, families, teachers, and program leaders. High-quality

family engagement activities can help build trusting and positive relationships between teachers and families, which can help address any concerns—such as behavior problems or developmental delays—and better coordinate a response before issues become significant and affect children’s learning.⁶¹

5. Multilevel continuous quality improvement system

Achieving high quality in an early childhood program is not a one-time milestone. Programs must constantly monitor, reflect, and revise policies and practices to ensure that they maintain quality. In addition to measuring children’s developmental progress, it is important that structures are also in place to assess the overall program, individual classrooms, and employees, using data to inform positive and proactive improvements.⁶²

Given that data shows many programs are not currently operating at high quality, it is critically important that quality improvement supports are available to help programs increase and then maintain quality.⁶³ Quality improvement supports can take many forms—including formal training opportunities, mentor programs, coaching, communities of practice, and informal networks of support—and can be accessed through state or national technical assistance providers or by local networks.⁶⁴ Most states have a QRIS, which can be a mechanism for directing quality improvement supports. In many QRIS, providers can access professional development and coaching opportunities and can receive financial incentives to purchase materials or equipment.⁶⁵ While QRIS offer a promising framework for accessing continuous quality improvement supports, these systems are still in the formative stages and are often under-resourced, resulting in supports being insufficient to sustain increased quality.

6. Sustainable and sufficient set of funding mechanisms

In order to support the highly qualified workforce, the safe and engaging physical and learning environment, and the stable business infrastructure necessary to achieve and maintain high quality, programs need to be able to access funding that supports the actual cost of operation.⁶⁶ Many public funding streams are insufficient to support the costs of high quality, and low- and middle-income families struggle to afford the cost of tuition at high-quality programs. In order to ensure high-quality programs are available to all children, public funding needs to be sufficient to cover the costs of quality and provide families with help to afford the cost of private tuition.

In addition, funding needs to be stable so that programs can make staffing and other business decisions based on anticipated income that is not subject to annual appropriations or fluctuations due to child absences. The total funding available to a program therefore needs to be adequate to cover the actual cost of operating at high quality and secure enough for programs to make plans beyond the short term.⁶⁷

High quality should be accessible for all children

These six elements are key to achieving and maintaining high quality in all early childhood settings. Given the huge variation in early childhood programs in the United States, there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to quality, and quality is not restricted to one program type. Family child care homes, child care centers—both for-profit and nonprofit—and public schools can all provide high-quality early childhood education for children of all ages. While targeted supports or modifications to standards might be required to take into account specific circumstances, the focus on children’s learning, development, and overall well-being can be maintained in all these child care settings. For example:

- Curricula can be implemented for infants and toddlers, not just preschoolers
- Family child care providers could access quality improvement supports through family child care provider networks
- Small programs might access administrative supports through a shared services alliance
- Rural private providers might partner with public schools or Head Start/Early Head Start programs to leverage services and supports
- Providers serving predominantly low-income or dual language learners can tailor family engagement activities to take into account the unique needs of their populations

Neither the demographic background of a child and family nor the type of facility in which the child is enrolled should be a barrier to accessing high-quality programs. However, programs need support to achieve and maintain quality. The six elements outlined above offer a roadmap to policymakers and stakeholders that allows them to focus on the key structures necessary to support high quality.

Conclusion

The need for high-quality early childhood education has never been greater, but programs are increasingly out of reach for a majority of Americans. As policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels develop strategies to address the child care crisis, they must simultaneously focus on the importance of quality. To achieve the goal of increasing access to high-quality programs for all children, it is vital that families and policymakers fully understand what quality looks like and what structures are needed to support it. The quality indicators identified in this issue brief can serve as a roadmap for policymakers to ensure the key supports are in place to help programs achieve and maintain quality and to help families access those high-quality programs.

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